

Review: 'Proof' was a strong film but it's also a compelling play at 4th Wall

The movie starred Gwyneth Paltrow and Anthony Hopkins but the Houston cast is equally strong.

By **Doni Wilson** | Sep 15, 2026



Tom Prior, Meg Rodgers, Laura Kaldis, David Kenner in 'Proof' at 4th Wall Theatre Co.
Photo by Gabriella Nissen

Right on the heels of impressive Houston Theatre awards including “Best Play” and “Best Artistic Director” in Houston for last season, 4th Wall Theatre continues their artistic excellence by choosing a first-rate play as a stunning season opener. David Auburn’s Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning “Proof” (also made into a fine film with Anthony Hopkins and Gwyneth Paltrow) is a domestic drama that digs deep into profound questions ranging from wondering about the nature of genius to figuring out what to do with a mentally ill family member.

Under Sophia Watt’s superb direction, this production makes dramatizing difficult family dynamics look easy and effortless with an outstanding ensemble cast and script that shines. “Proof” may refer to the elegance of a complicated mathematical expression that may only be produced and understood at the highest levels. But it also refers to the more mundane and exasperating ways that evidence is required in the politics of a family: how do you convince those around you to validate your truth? Those are relentlessly challenging equations to solve.

The audience is immediately drawn into the world Robert, a brilliant University of Chicago professor (a convincing and engaging Thomas Prior). **They walk to their seats while stepping on soil and moss in the front yard of a tired house that seems to be falling apart. It’s a set that works well (design by Kirk Domer), from sad patio furniture to old magazines and a dilapidated shed.**

Robert, like all of the characters in a way, can be on an unpredictable spectrum of delusional, droll, and difficult. Smart and smart-aleck exist often in single lines. Auburn understands that characters are never one thing: this is no melodrama. "Proof" is an effective and eloquent play that reminds us that there is never one trait or one thing or one event that defines everything about someone. How could it? That math never adds up.

Like his daughter Catherine, (a stellar Meg Rodgers, who also just won a big acting award for her portrayals in both "Angels in America" and "Leopoldstadt"), his exceptional mathematical ability is a big part of his identity. But Catherine has had to interrupt her education to take care of him as he battles serious mental illness. Her memories of her father haunt her in striking and moving ways; we see the high price she has paid to help him.

No matter what life flings at her, she somehow has to come up with all sorts of "proof" to answer those around her, no matter how much talent and loyalty she can muster up. Plus, all those comments from her exasperating father and controlling sister asking Catherine to follow their specific scripts for "normal." Genius, inherited or not, is deromanticized as the realities of its limits and challenges refuse to be ignored.

These demands are a lot to ask of a 25-year-old, especially one who has endured disruption after disruption in her life, including the death of her mother, and dealing with a father whose celebrated intellect may be related to the madness of genius, but cannot outrun the outrageous misfortunes of aging. It's a marvel to watch Rodgers' riveting performance: her delivery is pitch-perfect, with both serious and comic moments being completely believable.

One of the highlights of the show is showing the back-and-forth power struggles between Catherine and her older, richer sister Claire, (a wonderful Laura Kaldis), who has paid a lot of bills, but left the heavy lifting of paternal care to Catherine. Their battles show a profound understanding of sibling rivalry as well as the concern and love they have for each other, even with frustrating conflicts. Catherine spits out "Don't lie to me, Claire. I'm smarter than you," and she's not wrong. This is theatrical realism at its best: Rodgers and Kaldis (well, really, the entire cast) are completely in sync with each other and once you feel like a voyeur watching a family fight, instead of a play on a stage, then everything fits together, like the elegant mathematical proof that is at the crux of the plot of this play.

David Kenner as Hal, Robert's former student, shines as he provides a glimpse of where Catherine might have been heading if her studies has not been disrupted, and he also reminds the audience of the pressures of academia and the clock that won't keep ticking as one strives for academic greatness even with the distractions of youth. Claire and Hal react selfishly to revelations in the play that Catherine has her own journey to pursue, further illuminating the lack of support and gaslighting that Catherine faces from people who are so ready to doubt her, no matter the proof that is right in front of them.

"Proof" proves that 4th Wall continues offering first-rate performances with Houston's best talent both onstage and behind the scenes. This moving play seems even more relevant in the age of AI, family alienation, widespread mental illness, and an aging population. One can only hope that they crunch the numbers and extend this excellent production.